

RPG Reload File 011 – ‘Solomon’s Keep’

[October 23, 2014](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we go digging in the boneyard looking for something to keep. Each week, we dust off an RPG from the App Store’s past, offer it a nice cup of tea, and ask it how the family’s doing. It’s a bit of revisiting, a bit of reflecting, and sometimes just an excuse to dive into a great game deeper than our reviews usually allow. We love all kinds of RPGs here, and I’ll always do my best to cover a wide variety of games, but I need your help, my friends. That’s why once a month I’ll be playing and writing about an RPG chosen by your majority vote. Wait, not so fast with that pen and paper! You can cast your vote through the power of modern technology simply by commenting down below or dropping in on the [Official RPG Reload Club](#) in the forums. The next reader’s choice feature will take place in **RPG Reload 013**, which means this is your last week to get your vote in. At the moment, *Baldur’s Gate* ([\\$9.99](#)) has a fairly commanding lead, but anything can happen in the world of imagination if you believe in yourself.



This week, we're rolling into the back half of our Hallowe'en celebrations here in the Reload. In the first week, [I talked about](#) oc-cult favorite *Cthulhu Saves The World* ([\\$1.99](#)), and last week, [I took a look](#) at the frighteningly hard *Fighting Fantasy: House Of Hell* ([\\$5.99](#)). This week's entry, *Solomon's Keep* ([Free](#)), is probably not what anyone would classify as horror, but it has so many skeletons, it's hard to argue against its place around the apple-bobbing bucket. Released in spring of 2010, it's certainly had no shortage of love shown to it around these parts. There's [the glowing review](#) written by then-cub reviewer Jared Nelson, [the TA Plays Rewind](#) done late last year, and of course, [a huge thread](#) in our forums. Well, let's throw another layer on top, shall we? Normally, I like to go into a little history in these articles, but there's not much to tell with *Solomon's Keep*. It's a relatively recent game compared to some of the other titles I've looked at and it was born on, and is still exclusive to, iOS. There was a sort-of sequel in the form of *Solomon's Boneyard* ([Free](#)), which was kind of an arena-based take on the original, and a more traditional follow-up, *Solomon Dark*, was announced quite some time ago but has yet to release due to legal complications.

Solomon's Keep is an action-RPG with a heavy emphasis on the action part.

It's sort of what you might imagine would result if you poured two cups of twin-stick shooter in a blender with a half-cup of *Diablo*. You play as a young wizard-in-training about to set out on their final test before becoming a full-fledged sorcerer. All you have to do is enter the stronghold of evil wizard Solomon Dark, climb up to the top, and kick his butt all the way down. There might be the odd skeleton or zombie on the way, but it's nothing you can't handle, surely. The keep is 13 floors tall, with a few bosses sprinkled in every few floors to keep you on your toes. Your main goal on each floor is to find the stairs to the next, but it's probably not a good idea to make a run for the exit as soon as you find it. Each floor brings new, deadlier enemies, and if you're not leveled up enough to survive, they'll make short work of you. So really, what you need to do is kill everything. Or re-kill it, I guess. I don't know, just smash it with your magic until it stops moving.



As you wreak havoc, you might notice a little bar up at the top of the screen slowly filling up. That's letting you know when you'll gain your next level. When you do, the screen will flash brilliantly, giving you a rare well-lit glimpse of the dungeon, and you'll get to choose a new perk or ability from a selection of three. You can never quite guess what will be on offer each time,

which is where part of the fun comes from. The game gives you all kinds of tools you can use to win, but they might not be the specific tools you want, so you'll have to try out different things. You can also find items and equipment in the keep, along with gold that can be used to buy things or traded for experience points. There are four different kinds of offensive magic spells you can learn and refine, along with a bunch of other sub-skills, and each type has situations where it's very useful and others where it's not so good.

That's *loser* talk, though. Who wants strengths and weaknesses? Simply weld two types of magic together and enjoy the fruits of magic nature never intended. Of course, if you do that, those spells are forever locked in at the level they were at when you welded them, but it's a small price to pay, I suppose. This is one of the key points as to why *Solomon's Keep* is so good. You have a great deal of choice in how your character develops, but it's all so streamlined that you might never notice how complex it really is. Level by level, you get stronger and have more options at your disposal, but you also have to balance out your choices. Focusing on powering up a spell might seem like a good idea, but if you don't take care of your mana regeneration abilities, all you're doing is giving yourself fewer shots of a bigger gun, something that may not necessarily be to your advantage most of the time.



Another thing *Solomon's Keep* does very well is its atmosphere. The keep is really, really dark, with only the faint light from your magic staff lighting the way. It's hard to see things that aren't very close by, unless of course they're providing their own light. The music is also very foreboding, continuing on with its same oppressive rhythm anytime you're in the keep. Most importantly is the voice of Solomon Dark himself, who will taunt you mercilessly as you make your climb. As he laughs uproariously at each death, your desire to beat him down grows stronger and stronger. It's quite impressive how well the game is able to create such an evil atmosphere with such a cute art style and light premise. The motivation to defeat Dark is so overpowering, it's hard not to just plow all the way through the game in one or two sittings. When you finally manage to claw your way to the top and win, you can do it all over again if you want, and keep right on leveling and getting more powerful. It gets harder with each trip through, so it's never a dull time.

I really appreciate the way it manages its pacing. While it plays like a twin-stick shooter, you can't approach it exactly like one. Particularly in the beginning, your character is very slow and weak, and his mana bar runs out after only a few shots. If you accidentally stumble into a trap room where the

doors close behind you, you're going to be in a lot of trouble. In fact, even later in the game, when you're a wizarding wonder, stumbling into trap rooms unprepared is a quick way to the afterlife. At the very least, you need to wait a few seconds until your mana is restored and your sub-skills have cooled down. You might want to take a quick look to see if there are any treasure chests you can use to help you kite the undead herd, because sometimes backpedaling through the room isn't going to be enough to save you. As the game's difficulty grows, you might even find it prudent to use your key to go back to town after each room so that you don't risk losing progress. This is almost necessary if you play through on the difficulty level that enforces permadeath.



Once you're in the heat of battle, you'll still need to consider your mana. When it empties, you need to decide if you want to keep firing off weak shots to stave off your hungry followers, or if you want to cool it for a few seconds so that you can fire off something stronger. The mana bar is king, and although on the first playthrough you can cheese your way through with potions, it's better for you in the long run if you learn how to manage it properly before you have to. It's also important to manage your equipment

correctly. Equipment can make a huge difference, and you'll probably want to keep a few different staves and rings on you to swap around, depending on the situation. Even though the combat is basically straight-up action, these quiet moments of strategy and planning ensure the RPG side of the game shines just as brightly.

Of course, as an app this long in the tooth, how well it's running today is a very important question. The good news is that it still runs just fine in spite of not having any updates in a few years. It still plays well, and if you haven't touched it since it launched, you'll find that a lot of content was added after the fact. The bad news is, this app hasn't been updated in a few years, so you shouldn't expect things like support for retina displays, larger screen sizes, controllers, and so on. The game's heavy use of darkness disguises the black bars that appear on bigger screens, and the controls at least aren't broken at all like some games that are thrown off by the dead zones at the sides of the screen. Perhaps the best news is that the developer still plans on giving this game an extensive overhaul, and while the legal problems with *Solomon Dark* aren't anything to be happy about, the consolation prize is that it's given the developer more time to work on updating *Keep*. Let's hope that comes to pass.



Solomon's Keep is, in my opinion, one of the better iOS-original classics in the RPG genre. That hasn't changed over the years, and having an excuse to play it all week for this article instead of just sneaking in games on the side has been wonderful. You can grab this game and its semi-sequel for free right now for whatever reason, and if you haven't already, I strongly urge you to do so. It's a great exercise in obscuring complex design behind a simple interface, and it's nearly bottomless in its appeal thanks to that hidden depth. I've never put together a formal list of essential RPGs on iOS, but if I did, you can bet your bottom dollar this game would be on it.

Of course, that's just my opinion, and I'd love to hear what you think. Please leave your comment on *Solomon's Keep* in the comments below or in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums. I don't like to brag, but it's *arguably* the finest thread in our forum that has a picture of a Super Famicom in the opening post. I also encourage you to vote for which game you'd like me to play in the next reader's choice, especially if you don't want to see *Baldur's Gate* for whatever reason. Like an unrelenting shambling zombie, I'll return next week with another **Hallowe'en RPG Reload**. Stay spooky, and thanks for reading!

Next Week's Frightening Reload Hint: *I got a rock.*